

Revised cultural plan still lacking

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When the first draft of a proposed cultural plan for San Antonio was made public last October, I castigated it for being poorly organized, poorly written and ill-informed.

A revised draft - hopefully dubbed "final" - goes to the cultural plan's steering committee on Wednesday.

The new version shows improvement in organization. It comes with some historical and statistical background. It offers some good recommendations.

And it's still far from adequate.

Among the worthy recommendations and subrecommendations:

"Develop ... a program of board training with special outreach to persons of color."

"Strengthen communitywide marketing of San Antonio's arts and cultural organizations to residents."

"Provide small-business assistance targeted at **creative** businesses, including sole proprietorships."

Champion "public-private investments in infrastructure necessary to support the growth of the **creative** sector."

"Develop a high school **Creative** Industry Academy."

Develop capital grants programs to help arts and cultural organizations with deferred maintenance, new construction, renovation and endowments.

The city's Office of Cultural Affairs should "develop a quarterly forum for dialogue among public and private funders."

The city should seek voter approval for "a new, dedicated tax-based revenue stream for arts and culture."

These are all reasonable propositions, and if they are implemented they could produce significant benefits for the arts and for the city's **economy**.

But there is still much conceptual cloudiness, still much failure to make connections, in the revised draft.

For example, one of the plan's five major "strategies" is titled "Authenticity and Creativity," and its worthy objective is "to strengthen San Antonio's unique and diverse culture, heritage and architecture."

But the three recommendations under that strategy - develop master plans for urban design and public art and implement neighborhood tour packages - don't address the objective.

The authenticity and cultural grounding in San Antonio's built environment come from local craft

traditions in the building trades - masonry, carpentry, cabinetmaking, metalwork, tile work - which are nowhere mentioned in this plan.

Hold that thought while I mention another of the plan's recommendations - that the city create new "cultural districts or zones" and further develop the few we have.

The generic term "cultural district" isn't very useful.

A culturally and economically aware plan might connect the dots like this: The concentration of similar and related **creative** enterprises - such as traditional craft trades or graphic design - in defined districts can help promote higher standards, sharing of information and ideas, and visibility (which means sales).

The city can encourage the growth of such concentrations through zoning, tax incentives, marketing, incubator facilities and urban design.

This document calls itself "a plan for San Antonio's **creative economy**." But it shows little awareness of what the "**creative economy**" is, what it's good for, how it works or how it grows in the capacity to create value.

Surely we can do better.

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